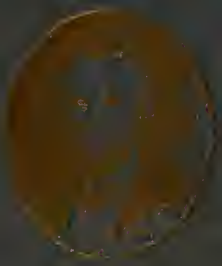
SHE KNEW LINCOLN



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Sincerely

Esther May Carter

All of a sudden de do' open an' Mistah Linkun hissef stood lookin' at me. I knowed him, fo' dar wuz a whimsy smile on his blessed face, an' he wuz asayin', deep an' soft-like, "There is time for all who need me. Let the good woman come in."—Page 8

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by

ESTHER MAY CARTER

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To

EDWIN MARKHAM

whose LINCOLN the MAN of the PEOPLE
is the noblest poem yet written on
"the Captain with the Mighty Heart"
this little tribute to NOBLENESS is
gratefully dedicated.

"The heart of Abraham Lincoln was as Big as the world, but there was no room in it for the memory of a wrong."

FOREWORD

I commend this story for the charm with which it is told, for its fidelity to the character of Lincoln, and for its fidelity also to the wonderful capacity for appreciation of kindness possessed by certain types of negro women.

The incident is true to Lincoln in that it shows his natural and spontaneous attitude and action in the pressure of human distress, no matter how apparently insignificant. *With* LINCOLN *human suffering was never insignificant.*

The negro woman is of high type also . . . a credit to humanity in her power to cherish throughout her life the memory of a good deed done to her. *The ordinary human being . . . white or black . . . forgets such deeds all too soon.*

BISHOP FRANCIS J. MCCONNELL
(President of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America)
New York City

(Author's Note)

While Dean of Women in Lawrence College, I chanced to meet the original of the Nancy Bushrod of my story. From her own lips I heard the tale of that Red Letter Day of her life—the day she met Abraham Lincoln. It was his last day on earth—a day freighted with decisions vital to a nation's future and harassed by vexing interruptions. Yet the "Pitiful High Heart" of him found time in it to comfort a young negro mother and—as afterward disclosed—to plant deep in her heart the seeds of a dauntless all-conquering courage, before the record of which I bow my head and heart.

Esther May Carter
Oneida Institute
Oneida, Kentucky

SHE KNEW LINCOLN

TO THE cheery tinkling of sleigh bells a big bobsled was making a cross-country run through Wisconsin snows. Tucked warm under robes and bundled in furs, the Browning Club was headed for home after its annual banquet in a neighboring city.

"We prided ourselves on last year's program," said Agnes Gaylord—"Club President Perpetual" they loyally called her, having kept her in office seven years— but to-night's program topped it. Why, everybody laughed and everybody cried—and that's appreciation at its best."

"It's a big relief to have you all pleased. It was rather a daring venture, even here in the North—to have readings by a Negro girl." This from the chairman of the Program Committee.

"Who was the girl?" "Explain your prodigy." "Solve us the mystery," came in a chorus from the end of the bobsled.

Agnes Gaylord answered: "Harriet has a real story for us, but shall we have it later, please, around the fire in Maxwell's room?"

A quick, understanding glance from a dozen women—and they fell

into jolly chatter of sleigh rides long ago, of drifts where the horses floundered, of spill-overs in soft banks. And surprisingly soon the driver's good-night rang out, prefaced by Tim McIver's cheery chuckle, "As foine a batch o' women as iver me team hitched onto."

* * *

They were in Maxwell's room now, and the firelight played on thoughtful faces. For seven years these "remembering" friends of Agnes Gaylord had watched the Old Year out with her—always in Maxwell's room, the room her only son no longer

needed, "sleeping in France where lilies bloom." And now it was less the Club president, and more, far more, the mother who said: "The Time, the Place, the Story! And we'll love the story better because Harriet says it's true."

"I'm a proud discoverer," began Harriet, "proud enough to understand how Christopher Columbus felt about America. I've discovered, right here in our own city, a woman who knew Abraham Lincoln."

A chorus of exclamations: "Begin at the very beginning." "Don't drop a single thread." "Please hurry."

"She is Nancy Bushrod," continued Harriet, "as dusky-skinned as she is white-souled, and I've come to care for her as the St. Clairs cared for Uncle Tom. Eighty years old, she is sitting out her days in a sunny corner of a cottage out in Glenwood. She's frail as a flower from a racking cough that would have snuffed her life out years ago, only—as Doctor King says—she has two magic wands that keep death at bay. One is an overflowing pride in her children, and the other is the memory of the day she met Abraham Lincoln.

"Nancy and her husband were both

slaves, on the old Harwood plantation near Richmond, until the Emancipation Proclamation brought them up to Washington. Here Tom joined the Army of the Potomac, and Nancy was left with twin boys and a baby girl. At first Tom sent his soldier's pay every month, but soon the pay stopped coming, and hard times followed. Washington was surfeited with colored help, and Nancy could find no work, though she tramped the city over.

"One morning the children cried because they were hungry, and Nancy's mind snapped into resolve.

She would see the President himself and ask him to help her get Tom's pay. Tom was fighting for the Union, and the Union would help her find food for Tom's children; and to Nancy's simple mind the Union was —Abraham Lincoln.

"She hadn't touched food for two days and was faint from her five-mile walk when she reached the White House. 'Business with the President?' the guards at the gate asked, in good humor. Her answer was grim: 'Befo' Gawd, yes.'

" 'Let her pass—they'll stop her farther on,' she heard one guard say,

so she took a deep breath and went on. The guard at the main entrance stopped her: 'No further, madam. Against orders.' But in a flash she darted under his arm and went straight to the guard at the farther door.

"'Fo' Gawd's sake, please lemme see Mistah Linkun.'

"'Madam, the President is busy; he can not see you.'

"At this Nancy must have given a little cry, for, in her own words, 'All of a sudden de do' open, an' Mistah Linkun hissef stood lookin' at me. I knowed him, fo' dar wuz a whimsy

smile on his blessed face, an' he wuz a sayin', deep an' soft-like, 'There is time for all who need me. Let the good woman come in.' "

Harriet King's voice, usually so quiet and steady, broke just a little here. "Nancy Bushrod's story always breaks here," she explained. "Well, it's enough for us to know that fifteen minutes of Lincoln's crowded day was cheerfully given to a young Negro mother—simply because she *needed* him.

"He heard her story through, then said: 'You are entitled to your soldier-husband's pay. Come this time

to-morrow, and the papers will be signed and ready for you.' Then, as she turned to leave—'Honey, I couldn't open my mouf to tell him how I'se gwine 'membah him fo'evah fer dem words, an' I couldn't see him kase de tears wuz fallin' "—he called her back:

" 'My good woman, perhaps you'll see many a day when all the food in the house is a single loaf of bread. Even so, give every child a slice, and *send your children off to school.*'

"With that, the President bowed —'like I wuz a natch-ral born lady,' Nancy always tells it, and turned

to a table piled high with work.

"All the long walk back, in drizzling rain, Lincoln's kindness enveloped her like sunshine, and the words, 'Send your children off to school,' crystallized into purpose.

"But there was no reaching the President the following day. That very night the fatal shot was fired that plunged a nation into grief, and the next morning gave Lincoln 'to the ages.'" Here Harriet's voice trailed off into silence. Then, with a little catch in her breath, Lottie Price said: "And on that very last day of his life, with a nation's problems weigh-

ing him down, he had time to help a poor colored woman."

"Always time for all who needed him," softly answered Elizabeth Wade. "That's why the common people stood by him loyally, even in his darkest days. But what about Nancy?"

"Nancy couldn't get near the White House that next morning, for the crowds that blocked Pennsylvania avenue. It was a big Scotch policeman, blinking back the tears, who told her, in his bluff, kind way: 'Ye dinna ken the President's deid? Woman, whaur ye livin'?"

"Nancy clung to the nearest post for support—her small world seemed shot to pieces—then she straightened:

" 'Befo' Gawd I swear it, I'se gwine ter fin' wuk, I'se gwine ter make Mistah Linkun's words come true. I'se gwine ter sen' my chillun off ter school!' "

"You mean, oh Harriet, *do* you mean"—Agnes Gaylord gave a little gasp—"that the Negro girl who charmed us so to-night was Nancy Bushrod's baby girl?"

"She was Nancy's granddaughter," smiled Harriet. "Years fly fast. But more about Nancy first. How she conquered the odds against her—how

she washed and ironed and scrubbed out a living, laying by 'coppers fer schoolin'' in a cracked teapot her 'shif'less' Tom never could locate—it's all a true story that puts the blush on fiction. When Tom was mustered out, he only added to her burdens, for he was a 'gentleman of the plush-rocker' type, and used to spin yarns of war days, while Nancy made the soapsuds fly. But nothing could daunt her spirit. Sandy McVean, the big policeman who heard her cry out over Lincoln's death, got her a janitress job in Ford's Theater, and for four

years she reverently scrubbed the steps that Lincoln had climbed that tragic night, when he went to the theater 'to forget his cares.' 'An' I nevah done no holiah wuk,' she always says, when she tells her story.

"The family moved out to Wisconsin in the early Seventies, partly to be near a brother of Nancy, but more for the good schools there that put no ban on color. 'Shif'less' Tom continued to feel 'tol'able—jes' tol'able —too feeble fer wuk,' but Nancy, with the children's help, ran a Snowflake Home Laundry that was the talk of the town. And out of the grades

into high school climbed the three children, the twin boys talking college all the time—and meaning it. Chloe would have meant it too, but a young minister from Milwaukee carried her off to be the pride of his parish.

"In the following year, sorrow came to Nancy, with fearful shock. Chloe's husband was drowned while trying to save a comrade, and—three days later — Chloe herself gave her life for a baby girl's.

" 'I'se got one more chile ter give schoolin' to

now,' Nancy said, when she took the baby in her arms, 'an' I vows ter Gawd—an' ter you, Mistah Linkun —I shore will do it.'

"And now," Harriet concluded, "not a mother among us has more reason to be proud of her children than Nancy Bushrod. Her David is pastor of the First Colored Church in Detroit; her Booker is teaching at Tuskegee (he was Booker Washington's own 'find' on one of his lecture tours), and her Beulah was our reader tonight, valedictorian of her class last June and now taking college work in expression. As you heard, she's wise

enough to confine her readings entirely to Negro dialect—where white folks can't compete."

"She's an *artist,*" exclaimed Lottie Price. "I watched your faces while she read 'When Malindy Sings.' Every face smiling but not a dry eye! Why, Beulah's reading is like Malinda's singing:

'It makes its way in glory
To de very gates of God.' "

"Perhaps," said Elizabeth Wade, "Paul Laurence Dunbar's poems appeal to her through a secret bond—his mother, too, was a slave. I've loved his 'Song of Summer' for years, and Beulah's interpretation made it

the very essence of joy." Then she quoted softly:

" 'Breeze is blowin' wif perfume,
Jes' enough to tease you,
Hollyhocks is all in bloom,
Smellin' fu' to please you,
Go' way folks an' let me 'lone,
Time is gettin' dearah—
Summah's settin' on de th'one,
An' I'm a-layin' neah huh.' "

The stillness that followed was broken by Lottie Price: "Oh, I have a lovely thought. Let's give Nancy Bushrod the finest Lincoln portrait to be found."

"Too late," laughed Harriet. "My doctor-man gave himself that happi-

ness on Nancy's eightieth birthday. And now she spends her days looking up at Lincoln's face. It's the glory of her life that she knew him, and no one chats with her who doesn't hear:

" 'Honey, I knew Lincoln—an' I knows him to-day—an' I'll know him yonder, when Sweet Chariot Swings Low fer me.' "

* * *

The bells of all the churches rang in the New Year. Agnes Gaylord said softly: "Dear Lincoln of the Great Heart, with *time enough* for *all who needed* you, you've shown us the path to follow—this New Year through."

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